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### The emotion style of aggressive-rejected children

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**THE EMOTION STYLE OF AGGRESSIVE-REJECTED  
CHILDREN**

A thesis presented in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

**Doctor of Philosophy**

from

**University of Wollongong**

by

**Jane Bajgar, BSc (Hons)**

**School of Psychology**

**2006**

## **CERTIFICATION**

I, Jane Bajgar, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Psychology, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Jane Bajgar

27<sup>th</sup> March, 2006.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Prior research suggests that the perceptions and emotions reported by children who are aggressive and are rejected by their peers are incongruent with their social standing and that this aggressive-rejected subgroup often report as though they are not rejected. In contrast to this, the withdrawn-rejected and aggressive-withdrawn-rejected subgroups report relatively high levels of distress and poorer mental health. The aim of the present research was to explore the emotion experiences of the aggressive-rejected subgroup in greater depth and to determine why this subgroup reports so little emotional distress. Three studies were conducted. The first study focused on the development of a measure to assess emotional awareness in children – the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale for Children (LEAS-C). The second study was originally intended to be the main sociometric study of the present research. However, a low participation rate did not allow sufficient numbers to generate rejected subgroups. Study 3 addressed these methodological issues by using passive consent procedures which resulted in a participation rate of 82% ( $n = 471$ ). Assessment of emotion experience included depression, anxiety, range in positive and negative emotions and anger expression. Processes which may account for low self-reported distress were also explored and included denial and repression, rejection sensitivity and emotional awareness. Emotion experiences and emotion processes were compared between three rejected subgroups – aggressive-rejected, withdrawn-rejected and nonaggressive-nonwithdrawn-rejected and the neglected and average groups. Emotion variables of the rejected subgroups and the neglected group were compared to those reported by the normative average status group. The emotion experiences of the aggressive-rejected subgroup were found to be similar to those reported by the average group. Contrary to expectations, the emotion experiences

reported by the withdrawn-rejected subgroup also differed little from the average group. The lack of difference between aggressive-rejected and withdrawn-rejected subgroups raised questions about how distinct the emotion experiences of these two groups were from one another. In general, there was insufficient evidence to support the low-distress hypotheses in aggressive-rejected children. The emotion processes reported by the aggressive-rejected subgroup also did not differ from those reported by other groups. With regard to emotion processes the aggressive-rejected subgroup did not make greater use of denial or repression, levels of rejection sensitivity were not lower and the emotional awareness of the aggressive-rejected subgroup did not differ from the other groups. Posthoc analyses explored whether methodological factors may have contributed to the lack of differences between the aggressive-rejected group and other rejected groups. The procedures to identify subgroups in this study were identical to those used by other researchers in the field. The proportion of children allocated to the rejected subgroups was also similar to those reported elsewhere. However, gender distributions in the aggressive-rejected and withdrawn-rejected subgroups were significantly different and the direction of this imbalance appeared contrary to other studies. Males comprised only 37% of the aggressive-rejected sample but comprised 76% of the withdrawn-rejected group. Contrary to expectations, withdrawn behaviour was found to be more strongly associated with low social acceptance among males while aggressive behaviour was more strongly associated with low social acceptance among females. The extent to which the trend found in this sample reflects sampling differences in Australian and North American cultures is not clear. The gender imbalance between the aggressive-rejected and withdrawn-rejected subgroups and the direction of this imbalance may have had some influence on group differences in the emotion variables. Posthoc analyses also

explored the relationship between emotion processes and anger expression within the aggressive-rejected subgroup and average groups. Emotional awareness was found to be significantly related to anger expression in the normal group. In the aggressive-rejected subgroup, anger expression was related to defensive processes.



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